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ABSTRACT

In fall 1997, Congress approved funding to implement Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) programs, primarily in Title I schools in high-poverty areas. This digest explains CSRD and what it might mean to rural schools. Since 1965, Title I has provided resources to at-risk children in lower-income schools. Changes in 1988 and 1994 broadened Title I by supporting "schoolwide" projects, while the 1997 CSRD legislation lays out criteria by which schools may select research-based reform models or develop their own strategies. In October 1998, Congress provided 2 more years of CSRD funding, including funds for technical assistance and field studies on the impact of various CSRD models on student achievement. Criteria for CSRD programs are listed. Field research on whole-school reform suggests that schoolwide projects increase achievement gains by at-risk students. Studies identify strategies that increase program effectiveness, as well as barriers to reform implementation and sustainability. CSRD requirements suggest that quality technical assistance will be a vital consideration for small and rural schools with scarce resources. CSRD is supported by active involvement of outside experts who aid educators with the details of real-life problems and challenges of reform. While it remains to be seen how federal and state officials interpret CSRD criteria, rural schools have opportunities to craft schoolwide reforms that fit local needs. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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A Practical Look at Comprehensive School Reform for Rural Schools

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In fall 1997, Congress approved $150 million to implement proven models and strategies for "whole-school restructuring." From this federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program money, $120 million is earmarked for competitive grants to schools that receive Title I funds to provide academic support and learning opportunities for children from low-income families. Non-Title I schools may apply for $25 million in funding. Through CSRD, schools receive at least $50,000 for the first year—with two additional years of funding—to implement and assess comprehensive school reform (House Res. 2264).

This Digest explains CSRD and what it might mean to rural schools. The digest examines research about whole-school reform and what rural educators can expect.

Legislative Overview

For more than three decades, the main tool for raising educational performance nationwide has been the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), more specifically, Title I. CSRD's relationship to ESEA-Title I could be important to rural areas, which tend to have relatively high percentages of impoverished children.

Changes in 1988 and 1994 broadened Title I by supporting *schoolwide* projects, enrichment programs for *all* students in schools with a majority of Title I students. The assumption is that the most effective reform involves the entire school, not individuals or classrooms. The 1997 legislation encourages schools to reexamine how—and how well—they operate as a whole.

Congress left it to states and school districts to distribute CSRD funds. But it did encourage states to fund regions, including rural communities, as well as schools with different grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). CSRD provides financial resources that enable rural educators to select from a marketplace of programs whose consultants have developed research-based products in pilot schools nationwide. The legislation lays out criteria for CSRD efforts, but also gives states and schools wide latitude in determining which strategies to fund, including "home-grown" models (Education Commission of the States, 1998).

In October, 1998, Congress provided another year of CSRD funding: $120 million under Title I and $25 million under the Fund for the Improvement of Education. These funds will support the continuation of grants for schools' second year of CSRD (United States House, 1998).

The 1998 CSRD funding reflects Congress' recognition that small schools (especially in rural areas) may be in a better position to implement reforms if they collaborate with other small schools. The minimum award may be granted to individual schools or to school consortia that serve up to 500 students (United States House, 1998).

Congress also budgeted $10 million for research into well-designed field studies on the impact of various comprehensive school reform models on student achievement. Some funding is to be used to design competitions for developing new school reform models, particularly for middle and high schools (United States House, 1998).

Congress also wanted to assure that all schools, particularly rural schools, can implement the reform plan of their choice. It set aside $12 million for a technical assistance program that could allow the formation of partnerships with states, regional service centers, regional educational laboratories, and consortia of local education agencies.

Program Overview

Congress specified that CSRD programs must meet the following criteria: (1) use research-based innovative strategies and methods; (2) have a schoolwide reform plan that enables students to meet state standards based on a school needs assessment; (3) provide ongoing, high-quality professional development for staff; (4) have measurable student goals and benchmarks for meeting those goals; (5) maintain faculty, administrative, and staff support; (6) nurture meaningful parent and community involvement; (7) use high-quality external technical support; (8) include a plan for evaluating implementation and student achievement; and (9) identify other resources available and how they will be used to coordinate services to support and sustain the reform (H. Res. 390, 1997).

Field Research on Whole-School Reform

Studies suggest that, in the poorest schools, it makes more sense to enrich all students' educational experience than to provide supplementary services to individuals or single classrooms; schoolwide projects increase at-risk students' achievement gains (U.S. Department of Education, 1990, 1993; Schenck & Beckstrom, 1993; Wong, Sunderman, & Lee, 1996; Stringfield et al., 1997).

Studies also show that schools vary greatly both in implementation and outcomes of reform strategies (Stringfield et al., 1997). Schools whose at-risk students make the greatest academic gains tend to pay attention to both initial and long-term stages of school improvement effort, and to incorporate new methods and programs into regular operations. Programs that concentrate on early grades tend to have larger achievement gains than do programs that spread resources across all elementary grades or in secondary schools. Effects on student achievement are most dramatic where (1) faculty and administration consider diverse options to match a program with local needs; (2) principals and central administrators sustain a focus on full implementation, with intelligent local adaptation; (3) technical assistance and staff development are ongoing and targeted to specific school issues and problems; and (4) curriculum is demanding (Stringfield et al., 1997).

Research by the RAND Corporation has identified four barriers to comprehensive reform: (1) difficulty in implementing new professional development models; (2) varied perceptions of school autonomy, which is important, but may not be well understood; (3) culture clashes between schools and external design teams; and (4) inability of design teams

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and schools to involve and engage the public (Bodilly et al., 1996). These barriers suggest how important local politics are within the school and the district. In rural areas, where a school may well be the central institutional force, issues of autonomy and politics are crucial.

In an alternative view, Tyack and Cuban (1995) support grafting thoughtful reforms onto healthy parts of an existing system. When educators completely scrap old programs, schools are more likely to revert back to them. Innovations that seem to solve problems for, or raise the status of, schoolteachers and administrators also tend to survive.

To date, whole-school reforms have concentrated on elementary schools. But a 5-year study of Wisconsin secondary schools suggests impressive achievement gains in mathematics, reading, history, and science linked to instruction that emphasizes higher-order thinking, disciplined inquiry, and the value of education for solving community problems or adding to students' personal experience (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Educators seeking appropriate ways to redesign schools should realize that few school districts and no states have tried widespread implementation of comprehensive school reform designs. There is limited data on whether these designs can be implemented across many schools—or how the designs change when adopted in different schools. Results also can change over time in the same school (Stringfield et al., 1994). Therefore, reformers must have a clear vision and be able to articulate that vision, offer leadership, and then build consensus for reform. Rural educators should ensure that their reforms have widespread public input and support, are well planned, and are sustainable in the long run, given the relatively small sum of federal funding.

What to Expect from CSRD and Reform Models

CSRD requires applicant schools to commit to proven whole-school reform practices. Any successful reform requires substantial investments of time, teacher and administrator resolve to complete the program, community input, and care about how the reform fits rural community needs. The guidelines also require some promise of replicability and an infrastructure for delivering successful reform practices and innovations to other schools via coaching or technical assistance.

Quality technical assistance, one of the CSRD criteria, will likely be a vital consideration for small and rural schools where resources may be scarce. Comprehensive school reform is supported by active involvement of outside experts who advise and help school personnel to retool schools with new skills, roles, and methods. To help assure success in rural communities, each reform design should be a functioning program with documented success in small towns and rural areas. Also, successful models and their associated experts should help administrators and teachers in a detailed way with the real-life problems and challenges of reform[1].

As such, schools need a great deal of autonomy, principals' roles must be redefined to give parents and teachers a central part in ongoing decision making and evaluation, and school administrators need to build consensus between teachers and community members. Support from the superintendent and school board is crucial.

Conclusions for Rural Schools

Sustaining school reform is difficult, and rural school officials should be fully aware of its implications. Congress clearly gave local schools a wide range of reform choices, and changes made to CSRD in 1998 are intended to give small and rural schools improved access to different reform plans. Much still depends on how federal and state officials interpret CSRD guidelines. There are, however, opportunities for rural school leaders to craft whole-school reforms that fit local needs and can be tailored for other communities.

Prudent policymakers and rural educators should be aware that existing whole-school reform models are generally in the early stages of development and implementation; and many are urban based. Elements of teacher time and school resources must be matched with community needs, resources, and expectations.

[1]Detailed information about various CSRD models is available from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (see reference) or Appalachia Educational Laboratory's Web site, http://www.ael.org/rel/cst/catalog.htm.

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